

Legislative Assembly of Alberta

CANADIANA

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Fact Sheet No. 4

Making Alberta's Laws

Have you ever wondered where highway speed limits or seat belt laws come from? The laws that say how fast we can drive or whether we have to wear seat belts are made by the people we elect to the Legislative Assembly.

The 83 Members of the Legislative Assembly meet every spring and sometimes in the fall. Most of their time during these sessions is spent deciding how taxpayers' money will be spent and what laws will be passed. The government must introduce a new budget each year; as well, because society is continually changing, there is always a need for new laws or for changes to old ones.

Alberta's Laws Begin With You

Because we elect our Members of the Legislative Assembly, they are really working for us, and our ideas help them decide what laws to pass. So if, for example, you wanted the government to pass a law requiring everyone to wear seat belts, you could take your request to the MLA for your constituency, or you and other supporters of a seat belt law might even arrange to meet with the relevant cabinet ministers, such as the Minister of Transportation and Utilities or the Minister of Health.

If the members or cabinet ministers you contact are convinced that most of their constituents want a seat belt law and that such a law would be beneficial, they would meet as a group, or caucus, with the other members of their party, and with department staff to work out the details of the proposed law. Should only children be required to wear seat belts? How much should people who refuse to wear seat belts be fined? When questions such as these have been resolved, the proposed law, or Bill, can be drafted. A Bill may propose an entirely new law or change an existing one.

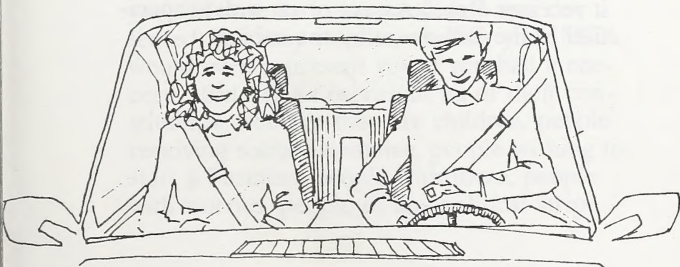
Kinds of Bills

- **Government Bills:** Bills approved by the cabinet and usually introduced by cabinet ministers. These Bills are sometimes amended but nearly always passed because they are supported by the majority party.

- **Appropriation Bills:** Government Bills, introduced by the Provincial Treasurer, requesting the Assembly to approve the government's spending of public funds.

- **Private Members' Bills:** Private members are MLAs of any party who are not cabinet ministers. Although Bills introduced by private members are seldom passed, they give their supporting members a chance to debate policies and concerns in the public forum of the Assembly. Private members cannot introduce money Bills.

- **Private Bills:** Bills introduced (by private members) on behalf of individuals or groups. Common examples include Bills to provide for the adoption of adult children by a step-parent or to establish a foundation.



How a Bill Becomes Law

Bills are introduced in the Assembly by a motion for **first reading**. The term "reading" comes from the early days of the British Parliament when printing was not very common, most people could not read or write, and it was necessary to inform the Assembly of the contents of the Bill by reading it aloud. Today, however, first reading means that the Bill is formally introduced in the Assembly. After first reading members examine the Bill and decide whether to support the whole Bill or just some parts of it or oppose it altogether.

The next stage of the Bill is **second reading**, in which the members debate the principle of the Bill. If a Bill would require motorists to wear seat belts, for example, members may discuss only whether they support the idea of requiring people to wear seat belts, not whether they agree with the details, such as requiring special car seats for children.

The sometimes heated debate on a Bill has to be controlled. The person who keeps order during debate and during all other procedures in the Assembly is the Speaker, who is an MLA elected to the position by the other members. The Speaker sits at the front of the Assembly and keeps the House running as smoothly as possible while giving all members a fair chance to state their views.

When debate on second reading is finished, the Speaker calls a vote. If the Bill passes this stage, it then goes to the **Committee of the Whole**, where every clause may be debated. The Committee of the Whole is made up of all MLAs. It meets in the

Chamber and is chaired by the Chairman of Committees rather than the Speaker. The Bill is studied in detail at this stage, and members may suggest amendments to any or every part of the Bill. Amendments are often proposed as a result of points raised in debate or concerns expressed by constituents.

When the Committee of the Whole has finished debating the Bill, it **reports** to the Assembly. The Chairman informs the Speaker that the Committee of the Whole has discussed the Bill and whether it has approved the Bill with any amendments.

The final stage of a Bill's journey through the Assembly is **third reading**. Again, members have a chance to comment on, criticize, or ask questions about the Bill before voting on it for the last time.

If the Bill passes all stages in the Assembly and Committee of the Whole, the Lieutenant Governor approves it on behalf of the Queen. We call this **Royal Assent**. Centuries ago British monarchs passed laws by decree, and even as Parliament gained more power over the years, it still needed the King's or Queen's consent for a Bill to become law. That tradition continues in our Legislative Assembly. Only when a Bill receives Royal Assent does it become an Act of the Legislature and part of the law of the land.

A Bill becomes law upon Royal Assent, but it takes effect according to the terms included in it. The Bill may take effect when it receives Royal Assent or on a date specified in the Bill or set by the cabinet.

